

## **SPACE SHUTTLE COLUMBIA RETRIEVAL**

*by Col. Douglas M. Black, USMC, retired*

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At 9:30 A.M. EST, on February 1, 2003, Leslie took a phone call from our son Jonathon. He said that space shuttle Columbia had been lost during reentry over Texas. I had not paid any attention to this flight or to the space program in general for several years, but I immediately felt a compelling sense of urgency to work the *LIFELINE*® process. Immediately I went to my bedroom, closed all doors, set the fan on medium, put on my headphones (connected to nothing), lay down, and began my cool-down period. An overwhelming sense of grief made this particularly difficult. Tears seeped from the corners of my eyes and slipped gently down my cheeks into my beard. All loss of life hits hard. However, loss of military personnel involved in high-profile national and international missions is the hardest for me to minister to and usually evokes intense emotion. Cool-down took about ten minutes. I followed standard *LIFELINE* procedures and finished at 10:00 A.M.

During the session, I coordinated with my guide, Thomas, who indicated there was work to be done. After proceeding to Focus 15,1 rolled back the time sequence to just before the shuttle breakup and joined the crew in the main cabin—standing just behind the pilot. The windscreen was filled with the yellow-orange flame of reentry friction and the entire vehicle was buffeted roughly.<sup>1</sup>

I asked to “see” the issue that would cause the disaster and was instantly viewing gaseous fumes seeping out of an upright panel that appeared to be an equipment storage locker. I then asked, “What does this mean?” The answer came, “There has been a mistake made by a crew member, an experiment was not stowed properly and once the gas reaches a spark, it will explode.”<sup>2</sup> This is a known issue but is considered to be of little significance.”<sup>3</sup> (As always, the speaker is unidentified. It’s my habit to go with the data and trust the process. I certainly know virtually nothing about space flight or the workings of a shuttle.)

At that moment there was a violent yaw to the left and then to the right. The yaw continued on into a complete roll to the right, and the shuttle came apart.<sup>4</sup> The bulk of the flaming wreckage

continued down and away from us at a terrific speed, leaving the crew suspended in midair with a panoramic, beautiful view of the earth. Then it was suddenly quiet, absolutely quiet. I sensed one or maybe two females and perhaps six or seven males floating in a sitting position.<sup>5</sup> They appeared to be glassy-eyed and semi-dazed but remained in a tight formation.

I consciously approached the commander, a middle-aged man with an “R”-sounding name.<sup>6</sup> He was very distraught. He obviously grasped the magnitude of what had just transpired and was frantically reproaching himself for making an “error.”<sup>7</sup> I spoke up and told him that he could not have prevented it. A small error got out of hand at an unfortunate juncture in the reentry sequence.

“Who are you?” he demanded in a distracted manner.

“I’m Colonel Black, USMC.”

“I don’t have a Marine Corps colonel on my crew,” he replied with a pained and confused expression.

“You do now,” I replied. “I’m here to help you move on to your next location if you want the help.”

He gave me a penetrating stare, looked around at the others, and then turned back to me. “We’re dead, aren’t we?” he stated in resignation, but quietly, as though he didn’t want to disturb the rest of the crew, who floated nearby but took no notice of our conversation.

“Dead is a highly overrated assessment, but, yes, your shuttle is gone and your bodies with it,” I replied gently—keeping direct eye contact all the while.

“What is it you do?” he asked, as he struggled to comprehend the situation.

“I’m a volunteer who comes to events such as this and offers to provide some company as you travel to your next location.”

“Are you dead, too?” he managed to ask.

“No, I’m not,” I replied simply.

He eyed me quizzically. Two and two were not adding up to four, but he seemed too fatigued and distracted to try to sort it all out.

At that moment four “family members” approached our location from above; they reached out and made contact with one of the women and another of the crew. (I did not get a strong enough impression to tell if the other crew member was a male or a female.) They shortly

began to pull away from the tight little group. As they rose up and away the commander jolted himself to action. "Hey, where are they going with my crew?" "It's OK," I reassured him. "They are probably deceased family members who are familiar to those crew members. It's common for 'dead' people to be met by family members or dear friends. Because this was an unexpected event, it took them a while to get here. In many cases they are waiting at the bedside."

A look of vague understanding crossed his face; some things were starting to make sense.

"I see," he said pensively. "What about us?"

"That is where I come in, if you desire the help."

"Well, sure, I guess so," he replied.

"Fine," I said, "then join hands and follow me."

"Wait," he said, in a sudden burst of linear thought. "What about our families? We'll want to see them."

"Don't worry," I reassured him, "you can visit them whenever you like."

"How?" he demanded.

"By simply thinking of them," I replied. "Think of them and you'll be with them."

He relaxed, satisfied for the moment, as we all joined hands and turned our gaze upward. Then I noticed three bright yellow, teardrop-shaped figures approaching from below. Although traveling independently, they were definitely converging on our location. While studying this unusual event I heard the commander say, "Those more of your folks?"

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"They have on the same yellow space suit or covering," was his matter-of-fact reply. (This "yellow covering" was mentioned to me while dealing with the Russian submarine Kursk disaster. This may be how others perceive our Resonant Energy Balloons (REBALS). Also, the others felt like TMI folks.)

"Yes," I said, "those are some of my associates from Monroe, here to assist, too."

With the astronauts linked hand-in-hand and the newly arrived Monroe helpers on either side and in the rear, we got under way. Thomas suggested the central tunnel entrance to Focus 27. "We are ready," he confirmed in a somber but confident tone. We moved rapidly and without

incident up through all the Focus levels. They flew by at breakneck speed, and we soon emerged into the bright sunlight and brilliantly blue sky of Focus 27.

As we slowed and settled on the cloudy surface, several figures started toward us. I released my grip on the pilot's hand and receded to the background, standing to the right of Thomas. We watched quietly. The Columbia's crew haltingly walked toward the approaching group of perhaps three dozen people. Suddenly I recognized Alan Shepard in the silver space suit he wore for his first suborbital flight. Shepard stepped up with a big smile and gave the commander a hearty handshake and a reassuring pat on the back. His eyes were locked intently on the new arrival, almost as if he was "grounding" him. Also, Shepard looked about forty years old, in his prime. "Well done and welcome," he said in a firm voice.

Others from Shepard's group stepped forward, each warmly greeting one of the newcomers. It soon looked like two fighter squadrons meeting at the officer's club for a drink after a day of hard training. Some of the group wore the space suits of Russian cosmonauts. Talk became more and more animated and cries of recognition were heard as the newcomers became more aware and accustomed to their new environment.

Thomas and I watched with great fascination from the sidelines. "This is real nice," I managed, as waves of emotion rolled over me. To avoid loss of control I tried to focus on useful data collection. "What are the qualifications for the welcoming committee?" Thomas replied, "Volunteers, like most everywhere else, but they must have played a significant role in the space program in Time and Space. It's a real plus if they gave their life for the cause."

"I'm overwhelmed by the pure humanity of it. It's real nice," I repeated, as my voice failed me and tears streamed from my physical eyes. My thoughts turned to the countries that had lost astronauts in this accident. I sent waves of comforting love to the families and then to the nations of those brave souls.

"These risky multinational endeavors dared on the part of all people have a real value in binding one nation to another," said Thomas. I'm certain he was trying to help me see the bigger picture.

## References

1. Washington Post, August 24, 2003, "Columbia's 'Smoking Gun' Was Obscured," by Kathy Sawyer, p. A15. Reentry Begins: "McCool: 'It's going pretty good, now, Ian. It's really neat, just a bright orange yellow out over the nose, all around the nose.'"
2. Ibid., p. A14. A Damaged Wing: "Investigators believe that during reentry, super-hot gases, called plasma, poured through the hole in the ... leading edge [of the shuttle's left wing], eventually burning their way into the wheel well and breaking up the wing."
- 3.

- a. Washington Post, July 13, 2003, "Mistakes of NASA Toted Up," by R. Jeffrey Smith, p. A17. Longstanding Problems: Shuttles had been struck seven times by foam debris from the liquid propellant tank. "Five of these incidents had involved the Columbia." Foam appeared on lists of critical safety risks for every flight, but NASA minimized the danger.
  - b. Washington Post, August 24, 2003, "Columbia's 'Smoking Gun' Was Obscured," by Kathy Sawyer, p. A14. No "Safety of Flight" Issue: The mission management team met five days into the flight. After discussion of possible damage due to the foam strike, Linda Ham, head of the team, concluded, "And really, I don't think there is much we can do, so you know it's not really a factor during the flight." Engineers' concerns were brushed aside.
4. Ibid., p. A15. The Final Minutes: "8:59:26 A.M. EDT, Flight control system fires all four right yaw jets to compensate for the tremendous force acting to the left."
5. New York Times, February 2, 2003, "The Columbia Space Shuttle's Crew of 7; 6 Americans and 1 Israeli," by Alan Feuer, p. 22. There were seven astronauts.
6. Ibid., p. 22, Columbia's commander, Colonel Rick D. Husband, USAF, was forty-five years old.
7. Washington Post, August 24, 2003, "Columbia's 'Smoking Gun' Was Obscured," by Kathy Sawyer, p. A15.1 Am Not Believing This: "Husband or McCool apparently bumped the joystick." There was no evidence of an attempt to override the onboard computer, and the incident had no bearing on the subsequent disaster.

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